



A girl smells an individually crafted scent at Cat Jones' Scent of Sydney. © Jamie Williams

## Scents, sensibility and the smell of a city

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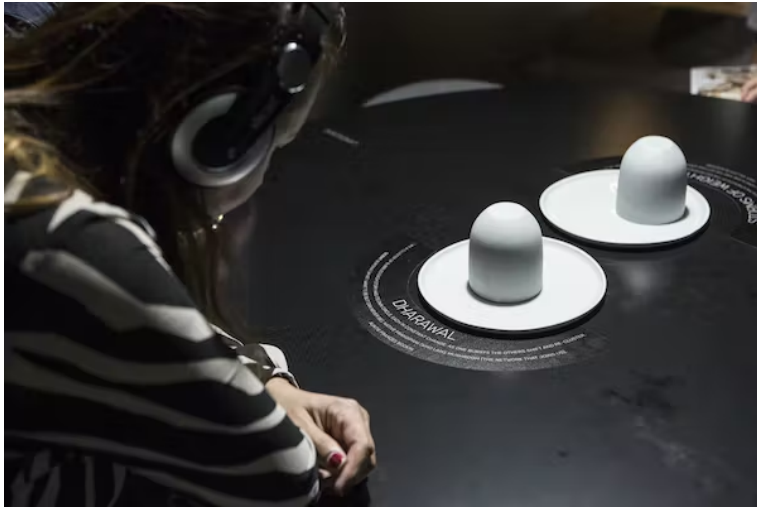
If you were to create the scent of a city, how would you do it and where would your olfactory messages come from? It might be the smell of fresh bread and coffee. Or a trace of brine in the air with your morning swim. The stench of bus diesel on the way to work, the gentle hint of frangipani on a summer evening or the memory of a pungent industrial odour from your old neighbourhood.

Smell is one of the most powerful and important senses. It's the first to activate when we are born and it filters into our consciousness every day in subtle and profound ways, influencing decisions, desires and dreams.

Olfactory is a word that regularly appears in a scientific context, but is not often associated with the visual arts. Conceptual and olfactory artist Cat Jones has created a new multi-dimensional project, Scent of Sydney commissioned for the Sydney Festival. She takes the city as its starting point and explores scent through storytelling and the creation of bespoke Sydney fragrances.

Following a series of interviews with ten prominent Sydneysiders including Anne Summers, Patrick Abboud, Michael Darcy and Auntie Frances Bodkin, Jones composed ten signature scents.

Each has been named, with titles such as Icons of a Lost Economy; Dharawal; Zaatar Wah Zait and Everyday Braveries. The interviews focus around five broad ideas as they relate to Sydney: Landscape, Democracy, Resistance, Competition and Extravagance.



Scent of Sydney. Jamie Williams

In a low-lit exhibition space, visitors can listen to each interview and sniff individual scents while seated around themed tables. The pace is slow and contemplative. Visitors can also add their own story to a growing database of Sydney scents after talking to roving “live artists”. The artists are there to help delve into people’s sense memory and to scribe stories into the archive.

Some of the scents Jones has created are definitely “on the nose”. The ten fragrances seem to capture the ambivalence expressed in interviews about Sydney, revealing it to be a sprawling, messy pull of contradictions. It is a town with a history of morbid corruption matched with great natural beauty. It has incredible cultural diversity but is laden with intense social and economic division.

For author, feminist and activist Anne Summers, “Everyday Braveries” conjures the scent of “the festive march of mops and balloons held in the face of fear and the generosity of brown rice cooking”. Summers shares the experience of setting up Elsie, the first women’s refuge in Sydney, in the mid-1970s. She describes the effort it took to continue through whatever setbacks they faced:

*There is a real smell associated with fear ... You have to overcome your fear. If you can't overcome it, you have to just not let it stop you doing what you need to do. That is what bravery is.*

Sociologist Michael Darcy researches the dynamics of city planning in Sydney. His interview is full of a complex nostalgia for the way the city used to smell. In his youth he could identify many of the suburbs based upon their industrial odor:

*Silverwater was the refinery and very chemical, sort of petroleum smells. Rhodes up the river was a very smelly place. When the wind was blowing the right way around here you could smell nothing but the brewery. I remember we used to play football training for school on a local park that was actually levelled out with coffee grounds.*

His fragrance “Icons of a Lost Economy” suggests a mix of “hot stewing hops, pungent, rich, bitter, malt, almost chocolatey”. The heavily textured scent evokes beer production at the old Carlton Brewery in Chippendale. Like many sites in Sydney, an apartment complex has replaced the former industrial zone and the local labour force has dissipated. The issue of displacement and fragmentation of labour is something that Darcy alludes to in his interview:

*In the global economy the value of locations becomes only about amenity and consumption and not about production; and so the connection between production and place just gets displaced and it's all about the view. Which is such a fundamental change [...] and it's all happened so fast.*



A close up of fragrances in Scent of Sydney. Cat Jones Copyright 2016

Marine scientist Bill Gladstone gives detailed descriptions of marine worlds above and below the water and shares his observations as a scientist of the cultural values held by people who frequent the coast.

He has a strong association with the Sydney seascape and his scent, “Storms of Weightlessness” captures the “briny air, living algae, and the rotting wrack of the aftermath”.

The interviewees represent a cross-section of society. They are all people with a strong sense of social justice and environmental understanding. Their oral histories reveal much about the city in surprising ways. Certain smells are literal and can be traced to an exact source like a particular plant species or food, while others are loose, abstract or metaphorical like the smell of fear, hopelessness and sexual attraction. They conjure ideas, rituals, anxieties and a sense of place rather than the exact material elements of the place itself.

Jones began to research scent composition as well as human olfaction beginning with a residency with the Institute of Art and Olfaction in Los Angeles. She has completed the ten scents of Sydney at the UTS Science Super Lab.

Leading up to the project Jones produced a number of projects that engaged the senses and she has a particular interest in audience psychology and immersive, site responsive and participatory artworks.

There is a strong empathic dimension to this kind of work because it draws the audience into the lived experience of others. The intimate sharing of memories and beliefs and the physical, sensory associations facilitated by story and scent creates a space where barriers can potentially come down.

In addition, she has organised a series of public conversations that focus around the five themes. I was fortunate to participate in the Landscape panel this week exploring cultural and biodiversity and pressures on our urban landscape. The rest - exploring themes such as democracy, landscape and extravagance - will unfold throughout January.

*The exhibition is in Bay 19 at Carriageworks. People can register to attend panel events online [here](#)*